

**VINYL STRIKES (NOT ONCE BUT TWICE):  
THE NON-DIGITAL FUTURE OF LISTENING TO MUSIC?  
(Structured Abstract)**

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**Short Abstract:**

Having been deemed to be obsolete nearly 30 years ago and faced with near extinction, vinyl records are enjoying since 2011 a major revival and seem to be changing the way we listen to music again. This paper uses an interactive-autoethnographic approach to explore how and why vinyl records enjoy such a growing popularity and deep resonance with consumers in today's digital age. As nearly 48% of vinyl consumers these days are under the age of 35, attention is also paid to examining whether the resurgence of vinyl's popularity may be signs of a changing marketplace. We found that, apart from being perceived to be technologically superior compared to digital music formats, young consumers are particularly intrigued by vinyl's materiality and experience the material ritual of handling and playing vinyl records as "something new" and exciting. But the research's most important finding is that many consumers turn to vinyl because of feeling disappointed, exploited, oppressed and betrayed by the digital music formats providers they once trusted and bought into. By contrast, vinyl is seen as a dependable, reliable and trustworthy recorded music format that offers them true independence and full control.

*Keywords: vinyl records, resurgence, marketplace evolution, analogue technology, renovated technology, betrayal & broken promises*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Deemed to be an obsolete recorded music format 30 years ago and faced with near extinction, vinyl records are experiencing since 2011 a major comeback with an average year-on-year sales growth of 40% (Jones, 2014, 2018; Sarpong, Dong & Appiah, 2016) – and that does not even include the extensive second-hand market (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2016). This surprising resurgence of vinyl, however, contravenes the dominant discourse in the CCT and marketing literature as much as in the popular media that has championed the digitalisation of music for more than 20 years as a disruptive technology revolutionising and *democratising* the way consumers would and want to listen to music nowadays and in the future (Elberse, 2010; Giesler, 2008). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the little CCT research to date examines vinyl consumers primarily as the *other* in the digital society, a countercultural minority rejecting for some reason the *superior* digital technology favoured by the mainstream (Hietanen & Rokka, 2015). In contrast, we suggest in this paper that vinyl records are not just enjoying an unexpected comeback as an outdated, analogue technology in the digital age (Fernandez & Beverland, 2019), but may actually be the future of how consumers listen to music (again). Thus, the aim of this study is to explore from an existential-phenomenological perspective how and why vinyl records enjoy such a growing popularity and deep resonance with consumers in today's digital age and whether these may be signs of a changing marketplace.

**BACKGROUND**

For more than 20 years, CCT and marketing researchers as well as the media have championed the digitalisation of music (but also movies and books) as a disruptive technology and force for the greater good that is revolutionising and *democratising* the music industry and, hence, the way how consumer access and listen to recorded music these days and in the future (Giesler, 2008). The underpinning assumption is that consumers would always be drawn to a superior, innovative technology that promises them better quality, convenience, unrestricted mobility, freedom of choice and personal fulfilment (Denegri-Knott, 2015; Elberse, 2010). As a result, every newly-emerging digital music technology starting with CDs (Daniel, 2019; Plasketes, 1992) over MP3s and digital downloads (Denegri-Knott, 2015; Elberse, 2010; Giesler, 2008) to streaming (Brown, 2016; Fuentes, Hagbert & Kjellberg, 2016) has been hailed as the future of how consumers access and enjoy listening to recorded music whenever, wherever and however they want – only for it soon to be replaced by the next emerging digital format.

When it comes to vinyl consumers, however, CCT researchers often discuss them primarily from a sociological-critical perspective as the *other* in a digital society (Fleck, Rossi & Tonsho, 2010; Plasketes, 1992). Despite official figures since 2016 clearly showing that 48% of today's vinyl consumers are under the age of 35 (Fernandez & Beverland, 2019; Hassan, 2016), they still tend to be portrayed mainly as nostalgic, often male, middle-aged (or even older), *not born digital* individuals (Belk, 2013), who reject the more advanced, superior digital music formats and cling instead to an outdated, analogue music format in order to preserve their memories of a romanticised past (Fernandez & Beverland, 2019; Goulding & Derbaix, 2019). To that end, these

consumers are said to ascribe certain *magical properties* to vinyl records that digital music formats like CDs, MP3s and especially streaming would lack, such as a *fuller, natural sound*, a *better feel* and authenticity (Fleck et al., 2010; Goulding & Derbaix, 2019). Some CCT scholars describe vinyl consumers as rebels within countercultural movements who have stuck with or turned to vinyl in defiance of the cultural mainstream's *enthusiastic embrace* of the latest digital recorded music technology (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2016; Hietanen & Rokka, 2015). Other studies even argue that the majority of today's vinyl consumers would neither listen to their vinyl records nor even own a turntable and, instead, mainly be interested in collecting their artworks (Sonnichsen, 2017; Yochim & Biddinger, 2008).

But the CCT literature's present discourse that the revival of vinyl would be down to either *not born digitals*' reluctance to adapt to the digital world, nostalgia, countercultural rebellion or their materiality and collectability fails to explain why vinyl records, after a 30-year long exile, have entered mainstream culture again with nearly half of today's vinyl consumers being under the age of 35 years, *born digital* (Fernandez & Beverland, 2019) and of both genders equally. This raises the question why CCT and marketing scholars appear to be so reluctant to explore whether we may be witnessing an unexpected change emerging in the marketplace that contradicts the dominant discourse in the literature. Thus, is it possible that the resurgence of vinyl records and analogue technology may constitute what Giesler (2008) has called a *drama in the marketplace evolution*, whereby vinyl consumers are now the ones occupying the roles of sonic warriors and pacifists that drive a change in the modern marketplace dominated by digital music formats?

## METHODOLOGY

This research takes an interactive-autoethnographic approach embedded within an existential-phenomenological framework. Drawing on the idea of the *lived body* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), the researcher explores from an *I'm-the-camera*-perspective and through social interactions with other vinyl consumers (Wohlfeil, 2018) how they perceive, experience, relate to and negotiate their personal preferences for vinyl records within today's digital age. The ethnographic data were collected over a period of 6 months during regular visits to three independent record stores and two HMV branches in two UK cities as well as during the local World Record Store Day 2019. The researcher's personal experiences, observations and conversations with other vinyl consumers, their accompanying relatives and friends as well as store owners and employees, who ranged in age from 14 to 73 years, were recorded contemporaneously as written field notes in a notebook diary (Patterson, 2005) and supported by photographs. A hermeneutic analysis was used to examine the field notes through repeated part-to-whole readings and identify underlying patterns that were then interpreted for deeper meanings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some interesting and surprising insights have emerged iteratively from the hermeneutic analysis that can be summarised under the following three themes:

### ***(Re-)Discovery of the obsolete "old" as the exciting "new"***

A dominant narrative in every conversation with fellow vinyl consumers, regardless of their age, is that of an unintentional journey of (re-)discovery. Today's consumers are well aware that vinyl is an old, analogue recorded music format with a history going back to 1948 and was deemed to be obsolete 30 years ago. Nonetheless, they tend to describe and experience vinyl records, in line

with Brown's (2015) concept of *renovated technology*, as an "exciting new" recorded music format that they have discovered by chance. Like the researcher, many of the middle-aged vinyl consumers (40 years and older) had in the early-1990s replaced their vinyl records with CDs and, after the millennium, with MP3s – especially on iTunes. But a recent accidental encounter with vinyl records and turntables, i.e. at a friend's house or in a local record store, has often provided them with a powerful reminder of something they feel to have been missing in their lives ever since turning digital 2-3 decades ago. The rediscovery of vinyl is seen as an opportunity to start anew or at least to continue where they "left off". Most of the young, *born digital* consumers, on the other hand, have described their first encounter with vinyl records and turntables more "like stumbling into this strange new world [you] never knew existed." Some of them discovered vinyl when they found their parents' or grandparents' turntables and records in the attic. Others have been introduced to them by their friends or discovering them in a record store before buying their own first turntable and records. Due to having been used primarily to MP3s and streaming, it is vinyl's inherent materiality that intrigues them. In fact, they experience the material ritual of handling and playing vinyl records in particular as something new and exciting.

### ***Reversed perception of technological superiority***

For the past 20 years, the digitalisation of music has been presented as a technological progress that provides consumers with a superior sound, convenient handling, unrestricted mobility and freedom of choice (Denegri-Knott, 2015; Elberse, 2010; Fuentes et al., 2016). In line with recent studies (Fernandez & Beverland, 2019; Goulding & Derbaix, 2019), however, this research finds that today's vinyl consumers perceive and experience the old, analogue vinyl technology to be superior to any of the digital music formats when it comes to sound quality, "feel", reliability and longevity. In fact, nearly all of the vinyl consumers the researcher has spoken with consider every new emerging format and update in the digitalisation of music as being "just another step in the serious decline of quality and choice". They view in particular digital platforms and providers like iTunes, Spotify, Deezer or Amazon Music, which have been promoted as liberating, customer-driven and offering unlimited choice (Fuentes et al., 2016), as being more and more restrictive, impersonal and designed to meet first and foremost their corporate rather than the consumer's interests. By contrast, vinyl is seen by these consumers as offering them the feeling of being in full control of use and ownership again, which they credit as one of the main reasons for its revival and growing popularity.

### ***Growing feelings of betrayal and broken promises***

One of the strongest drivers in the resurgence and growing popularity of vinyl records identified in this research, however, is a growing dissatisfaction and frustration among an ever increasing number of younger and middle-aged consumers of both genders with digital music formats and providers, which they experience as more and more often restricting and interfering with their personal consumption choices and participation in the marketplace. Indeed, the feeling of having been betrayed by the once trusted digital music providers and platforms has been voiced by the majority of vinyl consumers in this study as the major reason for them to (re)turn to an analogue technology like vinyl. Words they commonly used to describe their experiences with digital music providers and platforms over the past few years include "broken promises", "betrayal", "exploitation", "dishonesty" and "fraud". In fact, several informants feel particularly annoyed that those once trusted and praised digital music providers appear to "have no qualms" with removing digital albums or half of the songs that consumers have purchased from their stores or

even wiping out a consumer's entire digital music library that has taken a large investment of time and money to build, as the recent decision by Apple to shut down iTunes after 20 years has shown. The consumer is confronted with the reality that they actually neither own nor control the use of the digital music they have purchased (Watkins, Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2016). A 20-year old female consumer even recalled how Amazon had wiped her purchased e-books off her Kindle just because she had bought an e-book from "the wrong retailer". This research, therefore, finds that the resurgence of vinyl is not just a nostalgic return to a romanticised past and technology, but actually seen by vinyl consumers as a return to a dependable, reliable and trusted recorded music format that offers them the true independence and full control that, in their view, digital music formats and providers always promise but never deliver. As the young female consumer puts it, "It is highly unlikely that someone suddenly knocks on your door and takes all your vinyls away. In case of [...] you never know. It could happen any day."

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

The findings in this research contribute to theory by offering some interesting insights into why in today's digital age analogue *retro-technologies* (Brown, 2015) like vinyl records resonate so deeply with both middle-aged and young consumers again. Contrary to previous research, this research's findings show that vinyl consumers these days, regardless of whether they are *not born digital* or *born digital*, are actually very savvy with regard to digital technology and digital music formats in particular. It is **because** they have bought into the promised possibilities and *hype* surrounding the digitalisation of music and embraced the emerging digital music formats, providers and technology whole-heartedly for many years that they now feel being betrayed by those same digital music providers, who instead of *democratising* the music marketplace (Giesler, 2008) have become a powerful oligarchy that controls and dictates at will not just the available content but also the means of accessing it. The resurgence and popularity of analogue technologies like vinyl with today's consumers, thus, can actually be understood as a consumer-driven backlash to the perceived failings of the digital technology providers, their perceived abuse of their dominant market position and their apparent contempt for the consumer's personal interests – and, thus, the unintended result of the digital companies' own actions. By contrast, analogue technologies like vinyl offer an alternative that, despite their known short-comings, has already proven itself in the past to be reliable, trustworthy and often a truly social medium that can equally be enjoyed alone or together with others (Goulding & Derbaix, 2019).

The findings in his research also suggest that a similar marketplace evolution process is currently happening in the re-emergence and re-adoption of vinyl to the one Giesler (2008) has outlined in relation to the emergence and adoption of digital technology – but with reversed roles of dominance and rebellion. Further indicators are the rise of new record stores (Jones, 2018), the space allocated to vinyl records and turntables in HMV stores and the year-on-year sales growth (Fernandez & Beverland, 2019). However, due to the ethnographic nature and limitation of this research, it is too early and impossible to say whether vinyl records will be the future of how listen to music again. But it would be a fair guess that vinyl will co-exist side-by-side with digital music formats like MP3 and streaming for the time being, as even vinyl consumers continue to listen to digitalised music on their smartphones while travelling.

References Available Upon Request